

RESEARCH REPORTS

74.

PRIMORDIAL TIME AND THE ABOFOO DANCE

by Drid Williams\*

Dance must try to adjust itself to ever-changing social patterns and to the ever-present and fluctuating needs of the culture which it serves. At the same time, it must preserve itself; it must not discard, forget nor degrade the deep psychological and religious roots which are the very source of its life and vitality.

Often, writing about the traditional dances means that one becomes an apologist in one or several ways: the origins of the dances in particular create this rather uneasy atmosphere. Most of the traditional dances cannot be traced with accuracy in chronological time. This is the kind of time which historians, archaeologists, sociologists and anthropologists are chiefly interested in and it is well that they are. It will be admitted by most of them, however, that this is not the only kind of time there is. They will admit, for example, to eschatology.

Eschatology means those symbolic constructions which human beings have produced which refer to the world before it was and after it will cease to be. Eschatological time has a beginning and it has an end and it implies a continuum between these two points. Eschatological time, in a dancer's terms is linear. An eschatological statement familiar to most of us is the beginning of the Gospel of John in the Christian Bible:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Another kind of time can be called "primordial time." This kind of time differs from eschatological time: the former deals with the notion

---

\* Miss Drid Williams is a Tutor in the School of Music and Drama.

of some kind of a beginning or an ending and to those states prior to the beginning and after the ending and the latter does not. Primordial time, properly understood, HAS no notion of a "beginning" or an "ending." It is a kind of time which can be thought of as dominating all of life and which can be renewed every day or every week (or whenever), either in the present day occurrences of life or by the exact repetitions of certain rituals and rites which in a sense guarantee life, and with which the world can be created "new" at each event. A familiar statement of primordial time is the opening statement of nearly all children's stories:

"Once upon a time ....."

or, in Ghana, in the evening when everyone will gather to listen to one of the beautiful stories of the elders:

"One day, God said ....."

These are time-less statements in terms of chronological ordering and what we have called "historical time". To live in primordial time would mean a kind of living in an eternal today. Much, if not all, of myth, ritual and dance have their existence in this kind of time. Their significance lies precisely in the fact that they DO NOT concern themselves with the ordinary time sense (historical-chronological). To proceed from an attitude which apologizes for the fact that they do not concern this kind of time is to distort them, their function, significance or any other possible connection they might have to human life.

If myth is to be considered mere fable, a pastime worthy of consideration only by fools, children and those deprived of the advantages of "civilization" and "education", then the posture of the apologist is the only available posture. We submit that myth is not mere fable; a falsification of history. We submit that myths, rituals and dances are based upon a different kind of history because they belong to different time orders. In order to understand these phenomena in an undistorted fashion one must be governed, as it were, by the rules belonging to primordial time and not by the rules belonging to chronological time. Is it sensible to play tennis using the rules of football?

Myths, rituals and dances are important because of their content and because of the narrative of events in them which occurred: origins of the species, the world, the specific society, of the rites themselves, how fire came to humans, hunting, medicine, planting and of the initiations; all the framework of meaning which concerns the human's passage from birth to death and what happened to him before he was born and what will happen after he dies. All of these things are remote; the events are remote, in a very different kind of a way, if we will but stop to reflect a little. Life as it is lived today takes its origin and its meaning from these tales and actions; from this kind of "history". Myth, ritual and dance are three components of the sacred history of a people. This is true because their relations and their performance means that the people exist in time. Surely, this existence is at least as important as their continuing existence in three dimensional space.

Myth, ritual and dance ensure the duration and the maintenance of the life of the people in time and they provide the vehicles through which the individual encounters time. It could be said that this happens on three levels: the myth, story, or the "word" belonging to the intellect, the ritual belonging to the emotions and the dance belonging to the physical and instinctive nature.

The mythos of a people does not preserve its physical life necessarily, although it can be connected with these activities. The mythos preserves the psychological life. The truths of myth, dance and ritual are not logical nor historical truths. The truths engendered by myth, dance and ritual are of the genre that must be renewed constantly. We are familiar with this in some way or another, whether we attach it to a kind of daily resurrection, the festival of the New Year, the various observances of the seasons and harvests of some kind of yet to be formulated rituals connected with solar showers, gamma rays and cybernetics. True mythos is an act of faith; something which is believed and lived, like preparing for a "tomorrow" which we assume will come. Rituals are encounters with this kind of time, and with the meanings that we have assigned to our lives. Ritual dances are both repetitions and representations of these meanings.

Against this background, let us examine the legend of the origin and meaning of the Abofoo dance of the Krachi people\*, as told to me by the "Odiefu" of the Choboae Clan.

"The origins of this dance can hardly be traced. It is as old as the people. It has always been an ancestral dance. Since time immemorial, some of the great hunters had a vision. In this vision, they saw the animals dance. From this, the hunters got the idea of dancing like the animals. The dance is a celebration. We think of it as a sort of funeral for the animal who is about to die."

Immediately we are told that we cannot trace this dance in chronological time; "it is as old as the people." We are told that "since time immemorial" (primordial time) "some of the great hunters" (near supernatural personages who had special experiences and great adventures) "had a vision" (saw something that did not belong to the everyday, sensorially validateable world). "In this vision, they saw the animals dance", and knew, according to my informants, that there was some kind of connection between the efficacy of the hunter, "the hunter's luck", and the special force or power that the animal had. From this vision, we are told, these great personages got the idea of dancing like the animals. From further examination of the dance, we will know as well that there is a double *entendre* implied here: this dance is done both before and after the hunt. One of the functions it performs is that of the renewal of power, the re-affirmation of the mythical origins of the dance, hence the release of the unseen forces necessary for a successful hunt upon which the life of the community depended. Afterward, when the animal is killed, it is done again for the purpose of "washing" or "purifying" or "releasing" the hunters from the effects or affects of these powers which are, after all, inappropriate to the ordinary, everyday life of the men.

---

\* Field work has been done on the Krachi Abofoo. There is also an Abofoo belonging to the Kwahus which may have preceded the Krachi one. The northern Ewes also do this dance.

The Abofog is an example of a dance that is definitely connected with the preservation of physical life because it is a hunting dance. The word, "Abofog" means hunters. The animals involved in this dance are, in this order, the leopard, lion or panther, known as "Ofufuri", the buffalo, known as "Kyene", and the elephant, known as "Konte." To illustrate the dual form of this dance and the stated significance of it, it must be noted that Kyene (buffalo) differs from Ofufuri (the big cats) and Konte (elephant) in that there are no special drums for Kyene after he is killed because he does not have any special power (no arcane or potent force akin to "fa-tum") that can divert the luck of the hunter. Ofufuri and Konte have this power, therefore they have special drums for them after they are killed as well as before.

The trophies taken from the animals are as follows:

Konte:	lower jaw, tusks, tail and trunk
Ofufuri:	skin and skull
Kyene:	tail, lower jaw and horns

Before the hunt, the dance is done as a celebration, a funeral for the animals about to be killed and as a means through which the force is released that will ensure a successful hunt. It is important to keep in mind here that the hunting was done only with knives and spears. After the hunt, if an elephant is killed, the trophies are collected and placed upon the ears of the animal in the ritual dance space. Drink is brought and a libation is poured on the trophies. The drink is then served and a celebration made in honour of the dead animal. A calabash containing herbs and water, together with a tusk are placed in the centre of the dance circle and the hunter then washes himself in this. The same ritual procedure but with different trophies obtains if one of the big cats has been killed. In the case of an elephant, a bracelet may be made later from part of the tusk.

There is no special rule of certain hunters being identified with certain animals. This is important to know if only to correct a fairly common misconception that a hunting dance always involves some kind of "primitive" participation mystique with a particular animal or animals

and that the hunter identifies himself with the animal to the extent that he either completely suppresses or negates his own identity.

A boy becomes a hunter by killing something. There is no ceremony to initiate him into the group of hunters prior to that. There will be a ceremony "after the fact"; immediately following his deed. It is thought that if a boy is born to be a hunter, then he will have the heart to kill the animal; if not, he won't. A man is in no way ostracized or penalized among the Krachi if he is not a hunter. The whole affair belongs to his destiny (Konokro).

The special characteristics of the dance are as follows:

1. Accompaniment: two gongs, two drums and singers of both sexes arranged thus:



S.D. = Supporting drum

M.D. = Master drum

G1 + 2 = Gongs

(Musical accompaniment in the form of written phrases of music and translations of songs are being prepared).

2. Spatial forms: the usual circular form obtains as a general space and within this, these variations; 1) when representing any of the animals, the space is used entirely freely; 2) the dancers approach to the drums and the greetings are done in a clockwise movement, -- from left to right. (There is a reason for this; this dance is not primarily about "other worlds" like a fetish dance is, therefore the clockwise movement is appropriate. In Krachi dance, all fetish dances are done in a counter-clockwise movement. This will be explained more fully in connection with the Sokodai and the Boame dances in a forthcoming publication).

The dance begins with the Ofufuri (the big cats). The reproductions of the movement characteristic of the animals and the evocation of atmosphere is excellent. The cats are portrayed by the use of a men's cloth worn like a cape which swirls, billows, dips and flows with the moves of the dancer.

The movements that the dancer makes are fast, low to the ground, stealthy and quick; unmistakably those belonging to the cat family. The hand gestures, when the hands are not occupied in holding or manipulating the cloth, are exactly the same as the Indian mudra symbolizing "tiger".

The buffalo is represented by more ponderous movements; occasionally the head is tossed. The arms are held shoulder high in a rounded curve, corresponding to the ballet position of fifth position en avant. These arms represent the buffalo's horns.

The elephant is depicted in a most singular and interesting fashion, and Konte's dance includes a feature rarely seen in Ghanaian dance; nearly total absence of movement. The elephant is so extremely big and has such mighty strength and power that the only way to depict him is by the absence of, rather than the presence of, movement. Only the left arm, representing the trunk, moves. The elephant is depicted walking, but the movements of the dancer are very slow and very deliberate. Konte is also shown eating and slapping his back with his trunk.

The woman dancer does not represent any of the animals. Her function in the dance is a purely complimentary one. She is expected to be very much "en rapport" with the man who is depicting the animals and she will also do such utilitarian things as wipe the sweat from his face.

There is a mysterious animal in the bush which we were told about; it can kill hunters and drive them away. The Krachis call this animal "Sasabonsam." In all ways, the description thus far is the same as that described to me by the Lobis, who name this phenomenon, "Talatuur." So far, it has not been determined whether this animal is mythological or real; a phenomenon or a noumenon. Further research will undoubtedly produce more evidence one way or another. My informants tell me that only one hunter, among those they know, from another place has ever killed a "sasabonsam", but no one of them saw it.



This work is licensed under a  
Creative Commons  
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 4.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs  
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>